

Small but perfectly formed

Each month Joyce Russell puts some gardening tools to the test. This month 20 different types of hand trowels and forks

I must confess to being the owner of a very old trowel and fork set that was given to me decades ago. The prongs of the fork have twisted and the trowel has seen better times. You won't be surprised to hear that I don't use them often these days.

It has been a delight to test some new hand tools. There's a surprising range available, with a variety of shaped heads and handles made from different materials. All of them perform better than my old set. In fact, I think I'm a convert – I no longer need to stand up to use a long fork, then drop back down to knees when weeding a border. All I need is a good short-handed trowel and weeding fork.

The following tools were chosen for the test to give some idea of the variety available. Many of the manufacturers make a wide range of hand forks and trowels, not just the ones listed. Look at websites to find out more, or request a catalogue from suppliers.



Manufacturer	Model & Number	Typical sale price
Bulldog	Evergreen hand trowel 7112770680	£5.52
Bulldog	Evergreen hand fork 7111770680	£5.52
Burgon & Ball	Sophie Conran trowel	£14.95
Burgon & Ball	Sophie Conran fork	£14.95
Burgon & Ball	Sophie Conran weeder	£14.95
Burgon & Ball	Mid handled trowel	£12.95
Burgon & Ball	Fern trowel	£11.95
Darlac	Rubber handled trowel DP540	£7.99
Darlac	Rubber handled fork DP541	£7.99
Draper	S/steel transplanting trowel 44985	£6.27
Draper	Plastic hand trowel 53162	£1.80
Fiskars	Transplanting trowel 137103	£6.90
Sneeboer	Transplanting trowel 4007	£25.95
Sneeboer	Hand fork 5020	£25.95
Sneeboer	Jekyll fork 8008	£25.95
Wilkinson Sword	S/steel hand trowel 1111121W	£10.99
Wilkinson Sword	S/steel hand fork 1111122W	£10.99
WOLF-Garten	Planting trowel 2916 000	£9.99
WOLF-Garten	Flower fork 2921 000	£9.99
WOLF-Garten	Weeding/planting knife 2771 000	£9.99



Testing trowels for transplanting.



Tools are often sold separately – mix and match to get ones that you like.

What to look for

Is appearance important?

Hand tools are sometimes given as gifts and they are often on view in a kitchen, porch or conservatory when not in use. It's not unreasonable to want tools that look nice – just make sure they also function well for you.

How much do you want to pay?

There are hand tools available to match all budgets. Most manufacturers provide a range to choose from. At the cheapest end, a plastic trowel will do the job if you are growing in containers or beds filled with fine compost. If you have stony soil then you should pay more for a tougher tool. Boxed sets look lovely but can command a higher price.

I haven't featured them here, but some manufacturers make multi-tool sets (WOLF-Garten and Wilkinson Sword for example). These consist of a universal handle with a range of clip-on heads. This can be a useful option if you want a wide range of hand tools at a reasonable price.



Sophie Conran trowel is great for potting on.

Type of head

You might be surprised at how much choice there is. There are broad headed trowels and narrow ones. There are some with rounded ends and others with pointed ones. There are heads marked with a depth measuring ruler and others that are designed to lift deep-rooted weeds.

As for forks; you can choose between two, three or four prongs (tines). There are broad tines and narrow ones. Some are designed to lift deep-rooted weeds and others will dig between rows of plants. Tines that are sharpened to a point will slip into the ground easier than blunt ones.

Stainless steel is a good material for the head of a trowel or fork. This can be as a polished or roughened surface, but either way, the tool won't rust if it's put away damp or left outside.

Carbon steel heads are usually coated to protect from rusting. A coloured coating can make tools easier to spot if they are left around the garden.



Choose a handle that fits your hand.

Handle type

There is plenty of choice in this department so don't jump for the first one you see.

You can choose between wooden, plastic or rubber. Grips can be shaped or raised to give a firmer hold. Handles come in different diameter grips and at different lengths.

Balance and weight is important – you want a tool that fits your hand nicely and isn't awkward to hold.

If you are prone to losing tools in the garden, then go for a rot-proof handle. A bright coloured handle can make tools easier to find.

Take your time and don't be shy about hefting a few tools in your hand before you decide which one to buy.



Two lovely weeding forks.



Choose a fork head that suits the task.



Trowel heads come in many shapes and sizes.



Stylish Burgon & Ball fern trowel.

Joyce's pick



I'd actually be pleased to be given any of these hand tools. They are all nicely made, comfortable to use and don't look as if they will fall apart any time soon.

I'm going to mention three that I particularly like.

Sneerboer and Burgon & Ball

The Sneerboer jekyll fork and the Burgon & Ball Sophie Conran weeder are comparable tools in some ways (push into soil, twist and lift weeds).




The Sneerboer one is a heavier duty tool and it has longer tines, which probably makes it more use for a serious veg grower.

The Sophie Conran one is attractively boxed and it would make an unusual present for a gardener who spends time weeding borders.

Draper Stainless Steel Transplanting Trowel

This tool ticks all of the boxes for me. Small wooden FSC handle. Narrow pointed head, with enough kick up at the back to prevent soil falling off. On top of that there's a good clear depth gauge (labelled in inches – am I showing my age?).

The test results

Manufacturer/tool	Comments
1 Burgon & Ball Fern Trowel www.burgonandball.com	The stainless steel head runs as one piece up the back of the handle – gives extra strength but is a bit chilly on the fingers in cold weather. It is light, slim and is good for transplanting. Also makes a perfect job of sliding bulbs down to a good depth in the ground, or into pots of compost.
2 Bulldog Evergreen Hand Fork www.bulldogtools.co.uk	Functional three prong fork with sharp enough ends to work in tough soil. Same rubber grip and coated head as above. A cheap, strong and practical set.
3 Bulldog Evergreen Hand Trowel www.bulldogtools.co.uk	Robust tool. Rubber grip is comfortable to hold and the green-coated carbon steel head will take a lot of punishment without deteriorating. Heavier than some others.
4 WOLF-Garten Weeding/Planting Knife www.WOLF-Garten.co.uk	I really like this tool for lifting deep-rooted weeds. The narrow stainless steel 'blade' can be pushed down next to the root without disturbing the soil to either side. The head of the tool is longer than most trowels so it reaches deeper - still won't get the lowest lengths of a long dock root in one hit, but it works well for dandelions.
5 Burgon & Ball Sophie Conran Weeder www.burgonandball.com	A twist action weeder with three prongs. Made as above. 
6 Sneeboer Jekyll Fork www.sneeboer.com	Again, the same simple and strong construction. I like this tool at least as much as the Sophie Conran comparable one. 
7 Burgon & Ball Mid Handled Trowel www.burgonandball.com	The slightly longer handle makes this tool good for reaching to the back of a border or the middle of a raised bed. Would also be a useful tool for a gardener in a wheelchair. Nice build quality with polished stainless steel head, wooden handle and leather hanging strap.
8 Sneeboer Transplanting Trowel www.sneeboer.com	I really like the simple functionality of Sneeboer tools. The handle is ash (FSC) and the head is hand-forged unpolished stainless steel. But what makes this tool special is that the edges of the head are sharpened along the sides. It sliced through compacted soil without a bolter. It did this over and over and afterwards it looked as if it was still fresh from the manufacturer (unlike polished stainless steel which does tend to scratch).
9 Sneeboer Hand Fork www.sneeboer.com	Same build quality as above – unpretentious but will last for years. Broader tines than some forks, but pretty sharp.
10 Fiskars Transplanting Trowel www.fiskars.com	Orange flashes on the handle make this tool easy to spot. The long, sharp pointed head make it a great planting tool. Has a good length head and is lightweight. Contoured rubber handle has great grip.
11 Draper S/Steel Transplanting Trowel www.draper.co.uk	Yes please! Wooden handle (FSC). Polished stainless steel head. 
12 Draper Plastic Hand Trowel www.draper.co.uk	The cheapest in the bunch, but not to be scoffed at. It will scoop compost into pots and dig light soil, no problem. It might not last too long with hard use, but it won't rot or rust if left out in the rain.
13 Darlac Rubber Handled Trowel www.darlac.com	Rubber handle gives good grip and the polished stainless steel head is marked with planting depths. Both the trowel and fork were a little too large for me (small hand problem again!) but they make good, strong basic tools for someone with larger hands.
14 Darlac Rubber Handled Fork www.darlac.com	See above. The fork has three broad tines, (with a bend to give more leverage). Red flashes on handles make tools easy to find.
15 Burgon & Ball Sophie Conran Trowel www.burgonandball.com	I just love the look of this one. The small handle fits my small hand and the deeply curved head is perfect for scooping compost into pots. Made as below.
16 Burgon & Ball Sophie Conran Fork www.burgonandball.com	The Sophie Conran tools make an attractive set; with beech wood handles (FSC), brass ferrules and polished stainless steel heads. The fork has sharp points, which do make a difference when digging in a compacted soil.
17 Wilkinson Sword S/Steel Hand Trowel www.wilkinsonsword-tools.co.uk	Classic, strong and attractive. This trowel has a sharpened round edge at the front, it is broad enough to hold a scoop of soil and yet narrow enough to use as a planting loop. A good all-rounder and a lovely gift with its wooden handle and leather loop.
18 Wilkinson Sword S/Steel Hand Fork www.wilkinsonsword-tools.co.uk	See above. The fork from this set has three tines and a narrow head, which makes it light and comfortable to use.
19 WOLF-Garten Planting Trowel www.WOLF-Garten.co.uk	Bright coloured handles on WOLF-Garten tools mean you can spot them instantly. The narrow head on this tool is designed for planting. A light and well-balanced trowel that's comfortable to use.
20 WOLF-Garten Flower Fork www.WOLF-Garten.co.uk	This fork has four narrow tines. The head is quite large and hence it's an efficient tool for weeding a larger area. Comfortable handle grip.

FSC = Forest Stewardship Council Certified

